Bush ally harbored plane-bomb suspect

WASHINGTON — (UPI) — A key figure in the Iran-contra scandal with close ties to Vice President George Bush has acknowledged harboring a fugitive charged in the 1976 bombing of a Cuban passenger plane in which 73 people died.

Felix Rodriguez, whose contacts with Bush initially drew the vice president into the Iran-contra affair, said in a series of recent interviews that he harbored the accused bomber, Luis Posada Carriles, shortly after his August 1985 escape from a Venezuelan prison.

Offering the first details of his involvement with Posada, Rodriguez said he agreed to "hide" the fugitive at the request of a wealthy Miami benefactor who he said financed Posada's prison escape. He would not identify the financier.

Senate investigators are pursuing allegations that Posada's prison escape was financed in part by Jorge Mas Canosa, with possible help from White House aide Oliver North. Mas, who heads the Cuban American National Foundation, an anti-Castro lobby group, denied any role in the escape.

Rodriguez, a former CIA operative, offered refuge to Posada while managing a secret White House operation based in El Salvador to ferry weapons to the Nicaraguan rebels.

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Bush ally harbored terrorist

IRAN-CONTRA / *from 1A*

The weapons airlift was directed by North during a U.S. ban on military aid to the contras.

Despite Bush's friendship with Rodriguez, White House officials acknowledged that Bush took no action after numerous media reports in late 1986 identified Posada as a logistics aide for Rodriguez in the weapons airlift.

Bush was CIA director in 1976 when the bombing occurred. He took a personal interest in it and a string of related anti-Castro bombings that year, according to law-enforcement officials.

Donald Gregg, Bush's national security adviser, said, "I don't think the vice president knew that Posada was working with Felix [Rodriguez], so why would he call for an investigation?"

Bush declined to answer a series of written questions about the affair submitted to his press office last week.

calling itself Coordination of United Revolutionary Organizations.

CORU has been implicated in a string of bombings and assassinations in the United States and Latin America, including the Sept. 21, 1976, car bombing that killed Chilean exile leader Orlando Letelier in Washington.

On Aug. 18, 1985, Posada escaped from Venezuela's San Juan de Los Morros prison and fled to El Salvador. Rodriguez denied any direct involvement in Posada's prison escape, but said he helped arrange Posada's arrival at El Salvador's Ilopango air force base, where he gave him a job.

Posada

"I got a call from an old friend in Miami who has helped me financially, who wanted me to hide him," Rodriguez said. "I felt I had no choice. The man who called was a very old and dear friend, and he has helped pay my expenses since I have been in Central America. I felt I could not turn him down."

Rodriguez refused to identify the caller, but when pressed, acknowledged it was the same person who financed Posada's prison escape.

Rodriguez also refused to answer questions about his benefactor posed by Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., last month during a Senate Foreign Relations terrorism subcommittee hearing.